

Why Diversity Became Orthodox in Higher Education, and How it Changed the Meaning of Race on Campus

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Abstract

Using qualitative data about University of Michigan between 1965 and 2005, this article shows how administrators' diversity discourse and programs have defined race as a cultural identity, expressed through interaction, which provides instrumental benefits. It also explains three major reasons why, starting in the mid-1980s, university administrators adopted this racial orthodoxy of "diversity": to signal compliance with—and also to redefine—law and institutional norms while still practicing race-based affirmative admissions; to frame inclusion in more complex terms than a racial binary or numerical representation amidst growing campus multiculturalism; and to market the university, especially to white students. The article advances racial formation theory by developing the concept of a racial orthodoxy. It shows that diversity discourse and programs have sometimes advanced the goal of racial minority inclusion, but at the cost of downplaying problems of racial inequality and misrepresenting racial minorities' campus experiences.

Keywords

Diversity, race, racial orthodoxy, discourse, higher education, *Gratz*, *Grutter*, University of Michigan, sociology

Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, the University of Michigan pioneered the Opportunity Awards Program to admit and financially support racial minority students. The program sought to "provide opportunities to that group of citizens whose race and/or economic status has met social and cultural disadvantage from generation to generation" (University of Michigan, 1971:9) Administrators began it at a time when black students represented under .1 percent of the student body and when explicitly discriminatory practices, such as fraternities' secret "bias clauses," were commonplace on campus (Peckham, 1994). Like most other race-based affirmative admissions programs

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(Skrentny, 2002), the Opportunity Program focused on “minorities,” most notably poor black students from Detroit, and used their numerical representation as a barometer of success.¹ University officials rationalized affirmative admissions as compensation for racial discrimination in society, citing such rationales as “improving the position of black students as well as that of other minority and disadvantaged groups,” and “correcting social wrongs” (e.g., University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1970:391-4). This rhetoric on remedying racial and economic disadvantage and the programmatic focus on African-American students, together, constituted the university’s color-conscious approach to race at the time.

By the late 1980s, university administrators had adopted an expansive discourse on “diversity.” They still supported programs targeted to students of color, although they expanded the scope of such programs. Moreover, they changed their racial rhetoric and their rationale for supporting inclusion, no longer emphasizing minority students or disadvantage. In the 1987 undergraduate view book—that glossy publication distributed to potential applicants—the opening letter from university president Harold Shapiro states:

The University of Michigan is committed to being a racially, ethnically, and religiously heterogeneous community. This commitment stems from many sources, including the conviction that such diversity is essential to creating an intellectual and social climate which promotes the freedom of thought, innovation, and creativity so fundamental to an academic community (University of Michigan, 1987:4).

Over the following fifteen years, university leaders continued to describe the campus community and the university’s values in terms of diversity and to tout the instrumental benefits of diversity for learning. By the early 2000s, their diversity discourse and programs put greater emphasis on the marketable skills acquired through interacting with diverse groups, while downplaying race and racial minorities.

These changes in the university’s undergraduate admissions materials and programming indicate an important shift in racial politics and racial formation. Using archival and ethnographic data on the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (or “Michigan”), a university that has been at the center of both campus and national controversies over race, I argue that university leaders developed diversity as a centerpiece of their new, color-conscious racial orthodoxy. This racial orthodoxy treats race as one of many valued cultural identities, expressed through interaction, and as a resource that benefits everyone, not just minority groups.

This article advances critical race studies by developing the concept of a racial orthodoxy and by showing how the push for diversity communicates orthodox racial meanings. By racial orthodoxy, I mean a set of ideas, beliefs, narratives, and practices that constitute official, commonly recognized—but not necessarily hegemonic—understandings of race.² In organizational contexts, a racial orthodoxy is expressed and supported by discourse—such as rhetoric, ideology, and symbols—and by strategies of organizational action and activity. The organizational norms and expectations are that organizational participants, especially leaders, will communicate this orthodoxy. A racial orthodoxy need not provide a clear prescription for how the world should work, as does a racial ideology (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003a). Nor is it necessarily centrally concerned with race, as suggested by Omi and Winant’s conception of a racial project (1994 [1987] for critiques, see Nagel, 1988; Bonilla-Silva, 1996). “Diversity” serves as a keyword of the modern day racial orthodoxy in many locales.

The case of “diversity” merits that we refine our theoretical constructs for analyzing race and racial formation. Moreover, such refinement is necessary for understanding racial formation in the contemporary post-civil rights period of racial reconstruction—a period when race has not necessarily been a sole or a central concern of identity politics but nevertheless merits analytic attention

and scrutiny. For example, as I elaborate below, diversity discourse and programs in some contexts are centrally concerned with race, but in other contexts they may not concern race at all and even may help to downplay problems of racial inequality. The concept of racial orthodoxy captures this mercurial, flexible dimension of racial meanings and practices. It also recognizes people's reflexivity about their reliance on such meanings and practices; supporters of a particular orthodoxy may be openly self-conscious, even critical, of the limitations of their own approach. Multiple and contradictory racial orthodoxies can coexist within the same social setting, a topic which I return to in the conclusion.

This article looks to an organizational context to understand the formulation and expression of racial orthodoxy. Organizations, like universities, play a critical role in the creation and reproduction of racial categories, racialized practices, and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1996), although the role of organizations remained underdeveloped in critical racial studies (Staiger, 2006). In organizational contexts, racial orthodoxies are likely to be commensurate with core institutional logics.³ In the case of a prestigious research university like Michigan, such logics include leadership, meritocracy, and positivist research.

At Michigan, diversity discourse and programs commonly construct race as a one of many valuable cultural identities, expressed and experienced foremost through interpersonal interactions. Much diversity rhetoric at the university rationalizes racial inclusion on the grounds that it brings instrumental pay-offs such as better learning and more marketable skills. This is a marked departure from Michigan's early Opportunity Program, one that can only be explained by locating the shift to diversity in a broader legal, organizational, and political economic context.

This article identifies three major reasons why "diversity"—and an interpretation of race as both an expression of cultural identity and a resource with widespread benefits for all—became orthodox at Michigan. Legal influences were foremost. Scholars have shown that universities adopted diversity rhetoric because of both legal precedent (e.g., Green, 2004b) and field-level pressures on university officials to signal their compliance with law and professional norms and values (e.g., Lipson, 2007; Stevens, 2007). As I elaborate below, these explanations are compelling and, in many ways, correct. However, they leave out at least two important considerations. They fail to sufficiently consider both the broader political-economic and demographic context of higher education and the myriad, everyday uses of diversity discourse and programs, other than signaling compliance or conforming to administrative values. My findings on Michigan indicate that changing demographics, the rise of identity politics, and growing neoliberal market pressures on campus also influenced administrator's widespread reliance on diversity discourse and programs.

The article begins by elaborating key features of the racial orthodoxy of "diversity." Then, I explain the three main reasons why officials adopted diversity discourse and programs starting in the mid-1980s. For each, I show how diversity discourse and programs served an important role for administrators: a strategic middle road through legal constraints, a more nuanced approach to campus inclusion than a focus on African American numerical representation, and a sales pitch to appeal to white students. Throughout, I demonstrate how diversity discourse and programs constructed the meanings of race and institutionalized related organizational practices. In the conclusion, I elaborate the implications and shortcomings of the diversity orthodoxy, and I consider the relationship between diversity and colorblindness.

Methods

This article is based on my case study of race-conscious affirmative admissions at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and relevant controversies between 1965 and 2005. Michigan is one of

the most prestigious public universities in the US. Diversity discourse and programs at Michigan are representative of other competitive universities and colleges in many respects, as elite schools often establish standards within higher education (ibid) At the same time, Michigan represents an extreme case, particularly as the defendant in *Gratz et al v. Bollinger et al and Grutter v. Bollinger et al*, two major 2003 US Supreme Court cases challenging the university's race-conscious admissions policies. By selecting an extreme case, I could collect a great deal of evidence about the phenomena that interested me and maximize the power of my observations (Stinchcombe, 2005). Here, I focus on race and undergraduate students, although issues of diversity have not been limited to either.

My primary archival sources were the viewbooks produced by the undergraduate admissions office, the office's newsletters, the university regents' meeting minutes, and other records from the university's Bentley Library. Other texts analyzed include the legal filings, campus media, and promotional materials for undergraduate admissions.

I conducted fieldwork between spring 2002 and spring 2005. I initially did participation observation of the public and political activity around *Gratz* and *Grutter*. After the Court's decisions in June 2003, I turned my attention to the undergraduate admissions office and some campus diversity initiatives. I collected these data on the university's Ann Arbor campus and in Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. I conducted 31 formal interviews and innumerable informal interviews with a cross-section of organizational participants ranging from upper-level deans to student activists. I use first-name pseudonyms unless individuals made comments on the public record or have public identities that I could not conceal.

This study is part of my larger multi-case analysis of the organizational push for diversity, a project that also includes a city neighborhood and a multinational corporation.

A New Racial Orthodoxy

Between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, university leaders' made "diversity" a cornerstone of their public rhetoric on race and an organizing principle of many of their policies and programs concerned with race. In 1982, the admissions materials first noted the "incredibly diverse population" at Michigan. Quotes from white, black, and Asian students praised the "diverse student body" and the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds. Within a few years, diversity was a core theme of these materials. The opening page of the 1986 viewbook explains:

New undergraduate students at Michigan will join a group of 22,000 young people representing a diversity of social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, all 50 states, and more than 90 foreign countries. Minority student enrollment has grown to approximately ten percent over the past few years. Foreign students comprise more than five percent of the total enrollment (University of Michigan, 1986:3).

The university also made diversity central to Michigan's institutional identity beyond the admissions office. By 1992, the university's vision statement included the goal of being "recognized as a University that honors human diversity" (University of Michigan Office of the Provost, 2000).

Administrators' diversity rhetoric and the university's diversity programs had distinct features that differentiated them from the university's early approach to affirmative admissions, described at the outset of this article. "Diversity" was both racialized and ambiguous. The term often was synonymous with African Americans or implied students of color. Take a 1990 speech given by an admissions officer. The Office of Undergraduate Admissions was opening an adjunct office in Detroit to improve racial minority recruitment. At this time, the city was 76 percent African American, and the metropolitan region was the most racially segregated region in the

country (Farley et al., 1993). At the opening ceremony, the African American woman heading the new office told 350 educators and community leaders, “I am excited to be a part of the U-M admissions team. The commitment to meeting the goal of diversity will be realized as we all work together” (University of Michigan Office of Undergraduate Admissions, 1990 also see Stewart and George, 1990).

“Diversity,” however, did not solely refer to racial minorities; white students could be diverse as well. Administrators cited students’ social differences, geographic origins, economic backgrounds, and viewpoints as other important forms of diversity. The undergraduate admissions office sponsored a High School Scholars Day in 1989 to bring in 170 top student “scholars” from non-metropolitan areas of Michigan. The office described its recruitment of these rural students, who were predominantly white (Center for Urban Studies, 2002), as “part of the effort to increase the diversity of students on campus” (University of Michigan Office of Undergraduate Admissions, 1989).

A third distinguishing feature of this increasingly orthodox approach to race on campus was its rationale. Administrators reasoned that diversity provided instrumental benefits, especially for learning. The Michigan Mandate, a major strategic plan to improve racial minority representation at the university in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was subtitled “A Strategic Linking of Academic Excellence and Social Diversity.” The planning document stated:

... [F]or the University to achieve excellence in teaching and research in the years ahead, for it to serve our state, our nation, and the world, we simply must achieve and sustain a campus community recognized for its racial and ethnic diversity. But beyond this, we believe that the university has a mandate... to build a community that values and respects and, indeed, draws its intellectual strength from the rich diversity of peoples of different races, cultures, religions, nationalities, and beliefs.

The Mandate explicitly notes that the goal of addressing racial disadvantage is secondary: “In [the] future, the full participation of under-represented groups in all realms of national life will not be just a matter of equity and social justice. It will be the key to the future strength and prosperity of America...” In short, racial minority inclusion is valuable because it pays off, and not just for students of color.

The push for diversity entails, at once, a focus on race and a shift away from race. “Diversity” connotes racial minorities yet also is a vague, plastic referent. Diversity discourse on campus and many diversity programs use race as a modal category, but they rely on an expansive vision of difference that includes multiple categories of identity and difference. Moreover, diversity discourse and programs do not primarily define race in terms of the economic, institutional, or racial status of African Americans. They tend to define race primarily as a cultural identity of an individual or group, expressed through interpersonal interactions. In contrast to the logic of remedying racial disadvantage, which relies on a structural explanation of racial exclusion, the logic of diversity provides a cultural explanation of inclusion. Rather than emphasizing the imperative of social justice, diversity discourse and many diversity programs stress the instrumental benefits of racial identity and of interpersonal interaction along racial and other lines. And rather than prioritizing only the needs of racial minority students, diversity discourse and initiatives often incorporate, represent, and even cater to white students.

At Michigan, the adoption of diversity discourse in the 1980s was not a radical disjuncture from the recent past. In the 1970s, undergraduate admissions materials had described Michigan students as a mix, united by their shared intellectual drive. Likewise, there were important continuities with the university’s criteria for affirmative admissions, especially at the undergraduate level. For example, administrators continued to rely on the numerical representation of “under-represented racial minorities” as a key indicator of diversity and continued to use an admissions

policy with some measures to boost the enrollment of African American, Latino, and Native American applicants. Still, “diversity” signaled a new set of meanings in the 1980s, evident in administrators’ rhetoric and many campus activities and programs. Its advocates had embraced a new racial orthodoxy, one that conceived of race as a cultural identity and that rationalized inclusion on utilitarian grounds, with benefits for all.

Explaining the Turn to Diversity

University leaders at Michigan adopted diversity discourse and programs in response to law, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism, amid isomorphic pressures from peer institutions and professionals. Using both my data and existing research, I elaborate three explanations for their turn to “diversity” and its racial orthodoxy. I also draw upon ethnographic observations to demonstrate how Michigan administrators’ diversity rhetoric and programs satisfied various organizational interests by defining race as an expression of cultural identity, manifest in interpersonal interactions, and by justifying racial inclusion as beneficial for all.

Law: Managing Legal and Political Constraints

In the mid-1980s, Michigan administrators adopted diversity discourse to signal the university’s compliance with law and with norms among universities and colleges, but without fundamentally changing their bureaucratic routines around admissions. At this time, university policies to accommodate racial minorities were more common but also facing greater legal restrictions and political backlash (Skrentny, 2002; MacLean, 2006). Race-based affirmative admissions policies like those at Michigan became a lightning rod in these debates. The 1978 US Supreme Court case, *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* was the first major case concerning such policies. In the 1970s, Allan Bakke, a white man and undistinguished student, applied twice to the medical school at the University of California at Davis and was twice rejected. With some support from the nascent neoconservative movement (MacLean, 2006), Bakke legally challenged the university’s program that set aside 16 seats for racial minority students, out of 100 seats available.

Justice Lewis Powell’s solo-authored opinion in this case codified diversity as a legal rationale for race-conscious admissions policies (Schuck, 2003; Glazer, 2005). Powell’s opinion elaborated on a brief submitted by administrators from Harvard and a few other prestigious universities. He reasoned that “diversity” was a compelling governmental interest and an acceptable rationale for admissions decisions that account for race. According to Powell, institutional benefits—namely, “the robust exchange of ideas” central to the educational mission—ensue from an environment that is diverse along many dimensions. These dimensions include but are not limited to race and ethnicity.

Powell’s opinion provided the first legally-sanctioned justification for race-based preferences in affirmative admissions in higher education (Harper and Reskin, 2005) and the first explicit elucidation of the benefits of diversity in higher education and the benefits for white people (Schuck, 2003). Although his statement was not the majority opinion in *Bakke*, it included the most restrictions on how race could be considered in admissions decisions, making it the safest opinion for universities and colleges to follow if they wanted to use race-conscious policies.⁴ Powell’s opinion signaled to college administrators that they could consider race in their admissions decisions within certain parameters and that they should frame their admissions objectives in terms of diversity. Administrators followed his lead. The text of Michigan’s undergraduate view books in the mid-1980s, for example, began to mirror Powell’s reasoning that *everyone*—not just racial minorities—benefited from diversity. In his 1987 opening letter, President Shapiro notes that the university’s goal was to create a diverse community “in which all may thrive.”

Michigan administrators, like administrators elsewhere, also adopted diversity discourse in response to field-level institutional pressures and to indicate their shared norms concerning racial pluralism (Lipson, 2007; Stevens, 2007). Strong isomorphic tendencies exist among universities and colleges; as Stevens (2007:149) explains, “Instead of taking big risks through innovation, organizations more often hedge their bets through imitation. They keep their eyes on what *other* organizations... are up to, and then model their practices in the direction of where the big players seem to be headed.” The implication here is that Michigan did not just copy law. It also copied other universities.

Furthermore, officials involved in admissions, student life, and financial aid at elite universities like Michigan began to see diversity management as a strategy for institutionalizing race-based affirmative action (Lipson, 2007). They arrived at what Lipson (*ibid*) calls a “diversity consensus,” as diversity became part of their assumed, taken-for-granted expectations. In short, they personally valued diversity, as did their professional culture. At Michigan in the mid-2000s, admissions officers frequently expressed such personal values—one African American recruiter told me that he was proud to work for an institution that stood for “excellence, diversity, and confidence”—and they referred to the ways in which trade associations representing higher education administration endorsed Michigan’s admissions policies.

Although Michigan officials changed their racial rhetoric in the 1980s, they did not dramatically change the undergraduate admissions policy.⁵ According to Deane Baker, a white male Republican regent who was critical of the university’s policies towards people of color, the university had implemented a ““dual-track admission system”” for minority and majority applicants in the 1970s and continued to use this system through at least the mid-1980s (University of Michigan Board of Regents 1987:1096). By the mid-1990s, admissions counselors had switched to “grid systems” to evaluate applicants to the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA). These grids were uncovered and publicized by Carl Cohen, an outspoken white philosophy professor who claimed that the university used different standards to judge applications from majority (white or Asian) students and underrepresented minority (African American, Latino, or Native American) students (Cohen, 1996).⁶ In fall 1997, after at least a year of rumors about an impending lawsuit, Michigan president Lee Bollinger oversaw the switch to the undergraduate Selection Index (University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1996:10). Underrepresented racial minority applicants to LSA could receive up to 20 additional points, out of 150 total points.

Michigan’s admissions policies were legally suspect. In 1997, Michigan entered the legal spotlight when the Center for Individual Rights (CIR), a libertarian public interest law firm, filed two lawsuits on behalf of white individuals who had not been admitted to the university. The plaintiffs in *Gratz* and *Grutter* challenged Michigan’s admissions policies at the undergraduate level and the law school respectively, claiming that the university’s consideration of race in admissions decisions was unconstitutional. They charged that the university gave explicit racial preferences to African American, Latino, and Native American applicants without sufficient justification. *Gratz* and *Grutter* were the first major anti-affirmative action campaign to culminate in a Supreme Court decision and thus have national implications.

CIR was part of a larger New Right movement that, reacting to civil rights gains and the growing power of women and people of color, gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s and a foothold on college campuses (MacLean, 2006). Supported by conservative activists and government administrators, especially under the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations, this movement focused much attention on race-based affirmative action. Adherents successfully discredited the logic of remedying racial and class inequality. Groups like CIR promoted colorblindness as both a constitutional basis and an ideological rationale for dismantling affirmative

action (Brown et al., 2003). CIR gained notoriety for pursuing a case that ended race-conscious admissions practices in Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana in *Hopwood v. State of Texas* (1996) (Harper et al., 2005). In the mid-1990s, activists also began to wage successful state-level campaigns against race and gender-based affirmative action. Meanwhile, the courts were becoming more hostile to race- and gender-based integrationist policies. Such decisions as *Bakke* (1978), *Hopwood* (1996), and *Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.* (1989) found many such programs to be “racial quotas” and limited or altogether banned them.

The *Gratz* and *Grutter* lawsuits changed how Michigan officials used diversity discourse and how they designed diversity initiatives. While defending the cases, university leaders invoked such discourse to signal their legal compliance, but they also relied on it to redefine both law and the contentious politics of affirmative admissions. As Denise Green (2004a, b) shows, university officials did not just adopt Powell’s opinion as their legal defense. University executives, spokespeople, and lawyers elaborated what is now called “the diversity rationale” by supporting and drawing upon social scientific studies. Such research helped to create a body of scientific knowledge that backed their legal argument and became part of the legal record. Officials also garnered political endorsements by fostering strategic alliances with other educational institutions, corporations, military officials, politicians, and non-profit organizations. These organizations publicly supported Michigan and submitted amicus briefs that proved pivotal to the university’s ultimate legal success.

In June 2003, the Court endorsed Michigan’s diversity rationale. This made the cases a “victory” for the university although, as I elaborate below, the university had to change its undergraduate admissions policies. The university’s use of the diversity rationale and its success at the Supreme Court had three major implications for the meaning of race on Michigan’s campus and beyond. First, it codified a legal argument that, like Powell’s opinion, understood diversity as including but not limited to race. This argument also specified that diversity provides demonstrable benefits for people of various racial backgrounds and for institutions writ large. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote for the majority opinion in *Grutter*:

...[D]iversity promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce, for society, and for the legal profession. ... [T]he path to leadership must be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity.

This was the diversity rationale: all forms of diversity—including racial diversity—bring institutional benefits such as an enhanced educational environment, better national leadership, stronger national security, and greater competitiveness in the global economy. The diversity rationale has since been adopted widely at universities and beyond. Following the Court’s 2003 decisions, newspaper editorials were far more likely to support affirmative action and to do so on the grounds of diversity—arguing that a mix of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds enhances student learning and improves the nation’s leadership ranks (Richardson et al., 2004).

A second way in which the university’s legal rationale and the Court decisions influenced racial meanings on campus was they marked the end of numerical-based preferences for racial minorities, even in the name of diversity. In *Grutter*, the Court found the law school’s admissions procedures acceptable. In *Gratz*, however, the Court required the university to change its contested undergraduate admissions policy of assigning points based on an applicant’s race. Following the Court’s 2003 *Gratz* decision, Michigan administrators replaced the point system with what they called a “subjective” evaluation of each student application.

Third, the university’s successful use of the diversity rationale further reified “diversity” as the orthodox response to colorblindness and as the more moderate alternative to remedial racial justice. University leaders’ win at the Supreme Court in 2003 rested, in part, on their ability to

convince the justices that the university was *not* practicing race-based affirmative action in order to remedy discriminatory practices or promote racial equality. This was a deliberate decision. In formulating the legal rationale for diversity, university decision-makers rejected these social justice arguments (Green, 2004b), arguments that progressive activists had made when they intervened in the cases at earlier stages. By following Powell's precedent, university leaders further codified remedial racial justice as an unacceptable legal argument and a less politically viable discourse.

Thus, Michigan officials adapted their racial discourse and race-conscious admissions practices to the legal and political environment and the politics of race-based affirmative admissions, while at the same time they used diversity discourse to modify this very environment. In so doing, they helped to codify diversity, rather than colorblindness or racial justice, as their official racial orthodoxy.

These administrators also changed the meaning of race on campus—they changed, at least, the university's official interpretation of race—through their more mundane public speaking engagements and campus programming.

Making the Diversity Rationale Orthodox in Campus Life. People, in their everyday routine activities, do not directly translate law from the written word (Ewick et al., 1998; Sarat et al., 2003). They must interpret it. Thus, our understandings and experiences of law often differ from law on the books or in the courtroom. University administrators defined the meaning of race on campus by translating core components of the university's legal diversity rationale into accessible language, concepts, and images. Specifically, they communicated an orthodox vision in which race was one of many valued identities and was expressed through interpersonal interactions that enable those involved to learn and grow. This was not radically different than the university's diversity discourse or many of its initiatives prior to *Gratz* and *Grutter*, although officials in the early 2000s made some changes to the content of their message and the design of their programs. Moreover, they spent a great deal of time and energy communicating this message on diversity.

The administration's public relations campaign around *Gratz* and *Grutter* served as a mechanism by which administrators communicated the diversity rationale as racial orthodoxy. When CIR filed the lawsuits, the Office of the Vice President of Communications oversaw the design and implementation of a communications strategy, including the Admissions Lawsuit Media Plan. The Media Plan, which office staff shared with me, identified goals and tactics for communicating about the cases. One of the Media Plan's central objectives was to present the diversity rationale as uncontested fact and to downplay "the debate" over affirmative admissions.

The Media Plan included talking points—or, in local parlance, "messaging"—for university spokespeople. Staff in the Office of the Vice President of Communications consulted with lawyers, university leaders, and administrators to translate the university's legal arguments into these more accessible, distilled sound bites. One message, for example, was: "There is empirical evidence that learning in a diverse environment benefits EVERY student, regardless of race." The university president, the LSA provost, the director undergraduate admissions, and other spokespeople reiterated these talking points at events ranging from campus panels to national press releases, from undergraduate recruitment fairs to the university's public electronic listserv about the lawsuits.⁷ James Justin Wilson, a white student who often served as the campus spokesperson for students who opposed racial preferences, griped to me, "If you listen to the comments of *every* university administrator—and they all go on [National Public Radio] and all that—their talking points, I swear they must train 'em... They all say the exact same thing."

Administrators communicated this vision of race in more subtle and perhaps less intentional ways, as well. *Campus Diversity, Student Voices*, a film produced in 2003 by the university's

Dialogues on Diversity program, is illustrative. Dialogues on Diversity brought in speakers, did outreach in residential halls, and developed media. The film featured clips from interviews conducted with Michigan undergraduates before the Court's decision. According to the glossy brochure, the film "explores the role of diversity in students' lives at the university. In their own voices, students impart a close-up view of the scope and meaning of their experiences, and the significance of opportunities available in campus life to learn from difference." It spotlighted eleven students who differed by their school, year, race, ethnic heritage, class, national origin, geographic origin, gender, and political orientation.

According to one administrator involved in the film's production, the goal of the film was not to reinforce the university's legal argument. However, the film's structure and content reiterated many elements of the diversity rationale, including the articulation of race as a cultural identity pursuant to greater learning. The featured students talked about "diversity" in terms of their experiences learning about race in and outside the classroom, interacting with people of other racial groups, and familiarizing themselves with those groups' cultural differences, attitudes, and social practices. They invariably spoke of confronting diversity at Michigan as positive and informative for their own self-understanding and identity. A white male of Polish ancestry remarked that he disliked the course he took to fulfill the undergraduate race and ethnicity course requirement, but he also admitted to learning much from it.

University administrators also communicated this interpretation of race in their more mundane public performances. At the premiere of the film in downtown Ann Arbor, before an audience of about 175 people, the university provost introduced the film and then turned the stage over to a dean who had been involved with the film and was a well-known proponent of affirmative admissions. The provost, a white man, walked down a narrow staircase just as the dean, an African American man, was walking up. When the dean reached the microphone, he began, "You may have noticed the active diversity process—we winked at one another as we passed!—the challenge of walking up the stairs and descending at the same time." Here, again, administrators treated racial differences as something experienced through interactions that were at times personally difficult but nevertheless mutually rewarding.

Thus, administrators' public relations messaging, their campus programming, and their behavior in public settings on campus often reiterated the vision of race articulated in the university's legal argument. Their routine and even mundane rhetoric and behaviors portrayed this orthodox vision of race as a commonsensical organizational value and set of practices, tested by research and proven by personal experience.

While law is the most important factor influencing Michigan administrators' adoption and use of diversity discourse and programs, it is not a sufficient explanation for why "diversity" became central to the racial orthodoxy on campus. Diversity discourse and programs also framed race in ways that were commensurate with the changing demographics on campus and with administrators' evolving understanding of campus inclusion.

Multiculturalism: Moving Beyond Racial Binaries and Numerical Representation

By the late 1980s, university administrators began to rely on the vague, adaptable rhetoric of diversity to characterize the changing demographics of the student body. Diversity discourse described group difference in more complex terms than a black-white or majority-minority binary. It also expressed administrator's evolving understanding of campus inclusion as something more complex than numerical representation—namely, their recognition that the administration also needed to foster a tolerant campus environment.

At this time, more women and people of color were joining the college-bound population, the professional workforce, and the middle class, in large measure because of federal workplace affirmative action requirements and university affirmative admissions (Collins, 1983; Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 2007). The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act amendments of 1965 enabled massive waves of immigration from Africa, South and Central America, and Asia, (Portes et al., 2006). The rise of multiculturalist identity politics brought claims for recognition and resources from constituencies such as women, particular racial minority groups, and gays and lesbians, often on the grounds that people of a particular group were culturally predisposed to hold a certain worldviews (Bérubé et al., 1995). These changes created new and different pressures on university leaders to learn to manage increasingly heterogeneous student bodies (Schuck, 2003; Glazer, 2005).

At Michigan, the total enrollment of undergraduate African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans reached around 14 percent in 1987 (Monts et al 2002) and grew to 27 percent by 2005 (University of Michigan, 2005c). In fall 2005, just over half of Michigan's undergraduates were female (University of Michigan, 2005a) and about 5 percent were international students (University of Michigan, 2005b), compared with 47 percent female enrollment and 1 percent foreign student enrollment fifteen years earlier (University of Michigan Office of the Provost, 2000). Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals and specific ethno-racial minority groups gained greater visibility as they advocated for greater support from the administration.

In this context, Michigan administrators began to develop a more nuanced understanding of what it took to support affirmative admissions, in particular, and campus inclusion more generally. Most notably, they began to pay more attention to creating a supportive campus environment for students of color. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Action Movement and other campus activists had not only advocated higher minority enrollment: they also decried racism on campus and the lack of institutional support for black, Latino, and Native American students. Later events brought renewed attention to this environment. The Minority Student Reports in the late 1970s showed that black students were dropping out at high rates. A 1983 research report by Michigan sociologist Walter Allen highlighted the complex challenges that black, Latino, and Native American students faced once they were on campus. Then, a series of racist incidents on campus in 1987 alarmed students and faculty and led to protests about the campus climate, garnering national attention (Peckham, 1994).

Administrators relied on diversity rhetoric and programs to respond. Their diversity rhetoric described a broad range of campus programs and policies for students of color, other minority groups, and white students and they incorporated ideas about diversity into the design of these programs. Their discourse and many of their programs interpreted race as one of many cultural identities.

The Michigan Mandate, described above, was the first major university effort championed as a "diversity" initiative. According to university president James Duderstadt and other proponents, the Mandate sought to change the university to better accommodate minorities, especially students, faculty, and staff of color (University of Michigan Board of Regents 1991:236). With the Mandate, the office of undergraduate admissions continued to expand its minority recruitment efforts, along with its overall recruitment.⁸

But the Mandate did not solely focus on recruiting underrepresented students (or faculty) of color. It deployed over 100 programs which also covered retention, support groups, and multicultural awareness training (Lynch, 1997). Many of the new programs sought to make the campus environment more supportive of people of color and other minority groups. The Diversity Directory published by the Office of Academic and Multicultural Initiatives (OAMI) in the early 1990s

included entries ranging from the Affirmative Action office to a University Library seminar on valuing diversity. New administrative positions and bodies, such as the President's Committee on a Multicultural University, supported and monitored these efforts.

Importantly, a common theme across many new programs was that students (and sometimes, faculty and staff) should improve their skills at communicating and interacting with people of different backgrounds. These tended to be programs did not target a particular minority group. Efforts such as the Program on Intergroup Relations and Conflict (IGR), diversity training in dorms, and an educational theater program all sought to raise awareness of inclusion, racial and otherwise, to educate about cross-group interaction and to improve the campus climate. By the early 1990s, IGR reached between 400 and 500 students each semester. Its initial goal was to produce

a core of students who will contribute as leaders in a diverse, democratic society, by having experienced interactions in substantive ways with people from different backgrounds, and who will feel comfortable in asserting their leadership in mixed gender, racial, and ethnic groups (University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1993:223).

According to IGR materials, the program's classes and curricula have focused on encouraging "dialogues" among students of different "social identity groups." They intend to promote understanding of "diversity" and "social justice education" while improving interactions and managing conflict among students. IGR's award winning program has been replicated at other universities through a multi-university initiative on "diverse democracy" spearheaded by Michigan.

In the 1990s, Michigan administrators also invoked diversity discourse to recognize other minorities—most notably women and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (GLB)—and to characterize these groups as "diverse." President Duderstadt's 1995 Michigan Agenda for Women, modeled on the Mandate, sought "To create a University climate that fosters the success of women faculty, students, and staff by drawing upn [sic] the strengths of our diversity." University officials argued that these groups should be part of various inclusionary campus policies and programs. In 1993, the regents added "sexual orientation" to its official bylaws on non-discrimination and affirmative action (Sanlo et al., 2002). At a 1994 meeting, Regent Laurence Deitch, a white man, reiterated that the purpose of changing the bylaws was to make "'a reality out of our commitment to diversity'" (University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1994:266). Although some Michigan officials resisted such efforts (Lynch, 1997), those who advocated for GLB inclusion were in step with experts of higher education administration and with administrators at other universities and colleges (Barr, 1993).

Diversity discourse and programs helped to shift racial politics at Michigan beyond a black-white or majority-minority binary and beyond a focus on numerical representation, alongside demographic changes on campus and the rise of multiculturalism. "Diversity," as a centerpiece of the racial orthodoxy on campus, reified the cultural skills of interpersonal expression and tolerance. Moreover, diversity discourse and programs identified race as just one of many possible identities, and not necessarily the most important one. In supporting such an approach, administrators helped to broaden the rhetoric and politics of inclusion beyond race.

Yet diversity discourse and programs also supported a shift *away* from race, along the lines advocated by opponents of race-based affirmative admissions. Following the Court's 2003 *Gratz* decision and in the face of ongoing legal and political threats from organizations opposed to racial preferences, Michigan administrators changed more than just their admissions procedures. They also changed the criteria for minority student outreach and for some supportive student services, campus programs, and scholarships that previously had targeted underrepresented students of color. The Comprehensive Studies Program—into which the Opportunity Program had been folded in the 1980s—provided such academic, financial aid, and counseling support. In 1993, students of

color made up 99 percent of the first-year students enrolled in CSP, and African Americans made up a considerable majority (71 percent) of those participants (University of Michigan, 1999). In 2004, CSP had approximately the same number of racial minority first-year students—around 335—while the number of white first-year students increased from three to 100, becoming over 22 percent of CSP first-year students, with the largest leap in white student enrollment occurring between 2003 and 2004 (University of Michigan, 2004b).

University officials invoked diversity rhetoric to characterize and justify such programmatic changes. In spring 2004, the university held its annual Spring Welcome Weekend, a recruitment event that previously had targeted underrepresented racial minorities, particularly African Americans. In 2004, the university expanded the event to include lower-income white and Asian students. A high-ranking admissions officer, an African American man, told the visiting students, “We’ve broadened this day to be a special one for all kinds of students, all kinds of diversity.” Similarly, the university produced a brochure about the 2003 Court decisions, *The Educational Value of Diversity*, which prominently highlighted campus initiatives for gender, religious, and political diversity, although it made no mention of programs specifically for “racial diversity.” Regardless of individual administrators’ convictions about the cases or affirmative admissions, such discourse implied racial minorities while at the same time it could be altogether silent on race and racial inclusion.

Court decisions, like other legal arguments and concepts, may become part of people’s personal perceptions and organizational discourses and practices, far removed from formal legal arenas (Nielsen, 2000). There, they take on new meanings and significance. They are often redefined according to the local institutional logics of an organizational field (Edelman et al., 2001). Here, we see how the diversity orthodoxy served administrators’ interests as they sought to manage a complex campus environment. These administrators’ needs and interests were advanced by an expansive vision of difference that did not focus solely or primarily on race and by an interpretation of race as identity, manifest in one’s viewpoints and interpersonal interactions.

Another set of pressures—those of market competition—were becoming more pervasive at the university and also gave administrators incentive to adopt diversity discourse and programs.

Neoliberalism: Marketing the University

Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, undergraduate admissions at Michigan became both more competitive and more commercialized. University executives and administrators incorporated “diversity” and attendant notions of race into the university’s carefully crafted public image, as the university sought to attract both students of color and white students in the competitive market of college admissions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, just as selective universities and colleges were institutionalizing more comprehensive affirmative admissions and diversity programs, students faced new obstacles to gaining admittance to selective schools. The sheer numbers of students applying to universities increased, as did the qualifications necessary for acceptance (Peckham, 1994; Steinberg, 2002). Administrators began to assign greater weight to SATs and other standardized measures of achievement. In 1980, half of the entering class at Michigan had a combined SAT score of 1130 or less (University of Michigan-Ann Arbor Undergraduate Admissions Office, 1981). In 2005, only 25 percent of admitted students received a score lower than 1240 (University of Michigan Office of Undergraduate Admissions, 2005). Although elite universities and colleges originally adopted such tests to improve access for students other than wealthy white men (Lemann, 1999), these tests impede access for poor students, racial minorities, and female students in some fields (Alon et al.,

2007). They function as “wealth preferences” because wealthy students, who are more likely white, score highest (Sturm et al., 1996:953).

Disadvantaged groups faced additional barriers to elite schools like Michigan as the cost of college rose and state revenue and tuition support declined. In the mid-1960s, the state of Michigan paid about 70 percent of higher education costs. Student tuition covered the remaining 30 percent. Forty years later, following a major economic downturn in the state and changes in government funding, those percentages had switched (University of Michigan News Service, 2005). Between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, both the state and the university had reduced dollars for need-based financial aid while increasing merit-based financial aid (Heller et al., 2004).⁹ These shifts, part of a broader national trend, most benefited wealthier white students who probably would have attended college without aid (*ibid*) and contributed to income inequality throughout higher education (Pryor et al., 2007). Not surprisingly, the undergraduate student body at Michigan became wealthier over the 1990s. In 2002, 54 percent of first-year students reported a family income over \$100,000—up from 34 percent in 1993—while only 14 percent reported an income below \$50,000—down from 27 percent in 1993 (Matney, 2003).¹⁰

These economic shifts, together with heightened competitiveness in college admissions, complimented the ongoing corporatization of higher education. Since the 1970s, universities and colleges—acting as employers and as producers of goods (degrees) and services (education)—have refashioned more of their basic functions around the model of the marketplace (Slaughter et al., 2004). They have faced and, in some ways, have adopted and reproduced neoliberal market pressures, including pressures to treat students as consumers (Slaughter et al., 1997).

At Michigan, college admissions became increasingly commercialized during this period, as did research activities, educational instruction, and athletics (Bok, 2003). Administrators in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions adopted corporate discourses and practices of “enrollment management” to communicate the university’s brand identity (see also Slaughter, *nd*; Urciuloi, 2003). The undergraduate admissions office held recruitment events at upscale hotels, produced glossy promotional materials, and developed elaborate rituals for courting students. At the end of large recruitment events, admissions staff routinely sang “The Victors,” the campus fight song that hails Michigan as “the leaders and best!” During a 2003 campus tour for prospective students, one admissions staff person—seemingly aware that she might come off like a public relations specialist—joked that her tour and the Office’s video about campus life provided “our unbiased look at the university.”

Discourse on diversity, excellence, leadership, learning, and skills are now central to such recruitment and marketing efforts by universities and colleges (see also Urciuloi, 1999; Stevens, 2007). A racially-mixed student body has become an important indicator of a school’s prestige, academic strength, and national reputation (Stevens, 2007), and administrators have become increasingly concerned with such measures as national rankings of college and universities have become central to the competitive college market (see Sauder et al., 2009).

These pressures and related concerns encouraged the adoption of diversity rhetoric and policies at Michigan, and administrators depicted the campus as racially heterogeneous to appeal to competitive applicants. White students were the primary audience for the university’s diversity rhetoric, as they made up the vast majority of applicants and enrolled undergraduates. University administrators long believed that the idea of diversity appealed to white applicants. The 1985 view book includes a picture of a white female student and quotes her saying, “The best thing about U-M is its diversity.” A survey of Michigan students in the class of 1994 found that 30 percent of white students cited Michigan’s “racially and ethnically diverse student body” as an important reason in their decision to attend the university (Matlock et al., *nd*). University leaders were aware of such

perceptions; during a 1993 regents meeting, a dean noted that white students came to the campus eager to experience diversity (University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1993:222).¹¹

In their appeals to applicants after the 2003 Court decisions, administrators continued to depict race as a valued cultural identity, experienced through interaction, and to underscore the instrumental benefits of diversity such as learning. *The Educational Value of Diversity* brochures, distributed at recruitment events, featured photographs of students of different ethno-racial backgrounds immersed in conversation and classroom discussion. But university executives, admissions staff, and program administrators put a newfound emphasis on another benefit of diversity: improved job prospects for students in the competitive international economy. These leaders were taking a cue from Justice O'Connor's majority opinion in *Grutter*, which had cited an influential amicus brief filed by major Fortune 500 companies. The brief argued that racial and ethnic diversity in higher education is necessary for creating a diverse workforce, which provides a competitive advantage in the global economy.

In the undergraduate view book distributed in fall 2003, a new passage described the workplace of the future and asserted, "Those who succeed will be those who are comfortable with 'otherness,' whatever form it may take. Given those realities, you couldn't find a better place to prepare for the future than Michigan. For decades, U-M has made diversity its goal." Similarly, at a spring 2004 information session for applicants to Michigan's engineering program, the recruiter—an African American woman—read an ad from a technology company. The ad stated, "Diversity powers our business. . . As a global leader in communications, Lucent recognizes diversity as a business imperative." She then explained that Michigan students had attended a university job fair earlier in the year, and afterwards, these students reported that the most common question that companies asked them was "'How experienced are you with diversity?'" The recruiter remarked proudly that the students could say that they had a great deal of such experience: "Because diversity is the cutting edge in business, we provide that cutting edge here."

Statements such as these reiterated many elements of the university's diversity orthodoxy. They emphasized a wide range of identity differences, leaving those identities ambiguous; race was often unmentioned but implied. Difference was something to be experienced interpersonally. And such experiences have instrumental payoffs: namely, preparedness for the competitive global economy. Such statements also served as advertisements for Michigan as a premiere elite institution, with connections to industry leaders, and as preferable over other universities because of the skills training it provided.

Enrolled students were another audience for such rhetoric. Administrators of some university diversity initiatives invoked a similar rationale as they helped current students apply for jobs, professional programs, and graduate school. The IGR coordinator in 2004 posted a letter to students on the program's website titled, "Marketing Your IGR Experience."¹² He recommended that students highlight their experiences with IGR on their applications for jobs and graduate schools. These experiences, he explained, demonstrate teamwork and other top skills valued by employers as well as "care for one's community and sensitivity to diversity, two traits that are sought after in all walks of life." His letter provided examples of how students' resumes could indicate skills such as "deepened. . . awareness of social and cultural diversity."

The coordinator's suggested language likely is different from the language actually used by students in their IGR courses and on-line conversations. Still, he and other administrators invoked rhetoric about diversity and market competition to coach students on how to present themselves to employers. Such discourse and activities construct race as one of many cultural identities, and they portray students' ability to engage in tolerant cross-racial interactions as part of their arsenal of human capital skills. Unlike an affirmative admissions policy that explicitly seeks to support

students of color, these diversity programs and sales pitches are directed at all students, the majority of whom are white.

The racial orthodoxy of diversity is commensurate with a neoliberal market logic that asserts that organizational functions ought to be refashioned to support competitive late capitalism. According to this logic, elite universities such as Michigan should provide pre-professional training to undergraduates. Research on organizations suggests that pressures to adopt these logics emanate from the organizational fields in which universities are embedded—such as the ties between research universities and firms—and that universities also internalize and reproduce such logics (e.g., Sauder et al., 2009). In contrast to the university's rationale for the Opportunity Program, with its emphasis on the social value of redressing racial inequality, the diversity orthodoxy highlights individuals' instrumental self-interest in tolerance.

University administrators invoked "diversity" and related ideas about race when they addressed applicants of color and their families, but they often underscored a different message with this audience. In the wake of *Gratz* and *Grutter*, university leaders portrayed Michigan as a warrior in the battle for affirmative action. In winter 2005, President Mary Sue Coleman spoke at an African American Baptist church in Detroit. This was part of a university campaign to boost applications from students of color, which had declined since the Court's decisions. She told the congregation of hundreds of people:

Diversity in all of its forms is a crucial, central ethic of the University of Michigan.... That is why I dedicated myself so enthusiastically to the university's legal defense of affirmative action and admissions. We fought all the way to the Supreme Court and we won.

Here, at other churches, and in Detroit public schools, university leaders and admissions officers referenced Michigan's legal defense of diversity to send the signal: we are out there fighting for you. This—and not a message about marketable skills of cross-racial interaction—was the university's appeal to majority black audiences, at least in the wake of the Court decision.

Post Script

In fall 2006, following a long campaign by opponents of affirmative action, Michigan voters approved Proposal 2. This measure prohibits the university and other public institutions in the state from considering race or sex in public education, employment and contracting. Administrators at Michigan eventually changed their policies to comply. Although they amended their admissions policies and implemented an extensive outreach program to target geographic clusters of high schools and communities underrepresented at the university, they continued to couch the university's values and their admissions policies in terms of diversity. Following Proposal 2, enrollment of students of color declined, but not as dramatically as at other public universities following the passage of similar state laws. In fall 2008, black, Latino, and Native American students made up 10.9 percent of the first-year class, which was the first class admitted solely under the post-Proposal 2 admissions policies (University of Michigan News Service, 2008). This was a decrease from 13.2 percent in fall 2003, the last class admitted under the grid system (University of Michigan, 2003).

Conclusion

Diversity discourse at Michigan has refashioned race and race-targeted programs for an environment politically hostile to affirmative action, more varied demographically, and under pressures of market competition. At Michigan—and at other universities and colleges—organizational elites

led the call for diversity (Skrentny, 2002; Berrey, 2007). Diversity was not a demand of civil rights activists, and it poses some challenges for contemporary activists, who find they must simultaneously use the term and refute it (see also Berrey, 2005).

As I show here, organizational pressures and constraints within a broader political, economic and social context help to explain why “diversity” became the orthodox approach to race at Michigan. Foremost, university administrators adopted diversity discourse to signal their compliance with law and, over time, relied on such discourse to change law and politics. In so doing, they further codified diversity as the race-conscious counter to colorblindness and the moderate alternative to remedial racial justice. Diversity discourse also enabled university officials to justify, at once, programs serving students of color, other minority groups, and white students—it characterizes race, inclusion, and these programs in more complex terms than a black-white racial binary or numerical representation. And, in the context of competitive university admissions, diversity discourse provided as script for selling the university, especially to white students. These are the major reasons—law, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism—that administrators adopted the racial orthodoxy of diversity, starting in the mid-1980s.

This new racial orthodoxy changed the official meaning of race on campus, reframing race in terms that are compatible with organizational and political demands of the neoliberal, post-civil rights era. Administrators did not solely adopt a colorblind vision, nor did they maintain their earlier ideology of remedying racial inequality. The diversity orthodoxy emphasizes racial identity, cultural expressions of difference, and interpersonal interaction. It rationalizes inclusion as providing instrumental benefits, serving both the institution writ large and the individualistic self-interests of all students.

So, is diversity merely talk, the best that well-intentioned administrators can do in a hostile environment, or does it actively deliver benefits to the original civil rights goals of affirmative action? This type of analysis cannot demonstrate causal effects of language, although some important changes occurred alongside changes in the use of this discourse. The institutionalization of diversity rhetoric and diversity programs at Michigan coincided with an increase in the representation of students of color. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, enrollment and graduation rates of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students of color at Michigan increased. In fall 1988, African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian undergraduate and graduate students made up 15.4 percent of the student body on the Ann Arbor campus (University of Michigan Board of Regents, 1988:112). Ten years later, they comprised 22.2 percent of the campus, with considerable increases in the representation of all racial minority groups (University of Michigan Office of the Provost, 2000).

Yet, the *Gratz* and *Grutter* lawsuits coincided with a decline in the enrollment of underrepresented minority students at Michigan. In 2004, following the implementation of the new undergraduate admissions policies, African American, Latino, and Native American comprised 11.8 percent of new first year students at Michigan, dropping from 13.2 percent the previous year and from 15.1 percent in 1996, the year before the lawsuits first were filed (University of Michigan 1996; 2003; 2004a).¹³ Such patterns suggest, but of course cannot prove, that diversity discourse and programs need to be coupled with deliberately redistributive affirmative admissions policies to improve racial minority representation among students.

Students’ perceptions of the campus climate are another way, however crude, to gauge the influence of this discourse. In the early 1990s, most first-year undergraduates believed that the university’s diversity initiatives positively influenced their college experience and their cultural understanding (Matlock et al., nd). However, students of color, particularly African Americans, were more likely to believe that the university did not take sufficient institutional action to support diversity. Similarly, university officials appeared to have successfully persuaded white students,

during their time on campus, that the university supported students of color (*ibid*). Black students, in contrast, became *less* convinced of the university's commitment to them during their time on campus. Such findings imply that the university's diversity discourse and programs are most persuasive and most useful to white students but have failed to adequately represent the campus experiences of students of color or to provide the resources these students feel they need to succeed (see, e.g., Allen et al., 2001).

More recently, Kirkland and Hansen (2011) found that applicants to Michigan in the 2003-2004 school year wrote essays about diversity that expressed an individualistic and post-racial cosmopolitanism. The new diversity essay questions on the application, added after the 2003 Court decisions, favored those applicants who could show their cultural, religious and racial openness as well as white applicants who could express a self-awareness of race.

A major success of diversity discourse is that it has enlisted many organizational elites and many white people to support the goal of racial inclusion and some inclusive practices. It can help to create a supportive institutional climate for minority groups by signaling that explicit prejudice and racism are unacceptable and by providing a race-conscious language for recognizing and talking about social differences. These are vital components of eliminating racial inequality.

However, the diversity orthodoxy and its approach to race also raise serious concerns. This orthodoxy characterizes race in simplistic, often essentialist terms and categories, and it easily obscures the issues that people of color care about. Similarly, it can trivialize inclusion in ways that are demeaning to minority groups and that encourage majority groups to adopt stereotypes. At a spring 2003 meeting of a student organization that supported affirmative action, Monica, an African American activist, said that the university had made a strategic decision to argue the diversity rationale, but she did not agree with the reasoning of the rationale: "It's very limited to me... Students of color are on campus to educate white students? Like a tree, to add color?"

Another shortcoming of diversity discourse and programs is that they need not recognize race at all. Race can easily drop off the agenda, especially in the face of political opposition. Along these same lines, diversity discourse downplays the distinctive ways in which race organizes our life chances and opportunities and the distinctive obstacles that racism creates.

Diversity discourse and the existence of diversity programs suggest institutional change but do not prescribe institutional outcomes. Such ambiguity surely makes them more appealing to decision-makers. They can easily give the impression that change is occurring when, in fact, no changes have been made, or they can suggest misleading changes. The goal of "diversity" also can obscure the mechanisms by which administrators make decisions about allocating resources to groups (thus making it difficult for anyone, social scientists included, to assess if change is happening!). We can imagine how such ambiguity might be advantageous and strategic in situations where elites are at least moderately sympathetic to racial inclusion but face political hostility. In other contexts, it seems extremely risky. In short, the broader push for diversity largely requires that we trust institutional elites to value racial inclusion and to follow through.

This article elaborates the racial orthodoxy communicated through diversity discourse and programs. I intend the concept of a racial orthodoxy to be particularly useful for describing racial formation in the contemporary period, although it need not be limited to this era. Future research should consider the merits and utility of this concept and its application to other contexts and racialized issues.

One fruitful topic for future analysis is the relationship between diversity and colorblindness. Today, colorblindness—as a racist ideology and political agenda (Bonilla-Silva, 2003b; Brown et al., 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004)—plays a major role in defining the current racial order. However, if we tell the story of contemporary racial inequality as primarily a story of

colorblindness, we miss important processes of racial accommodation and inclusion and of ongoing white domination. Ideas and practices concerning “diversity” matter at the level of organizations and politics, as I show here, and also at the individual level, as they inform and express people’s perceptions of race (Bell et al., 2007). The Michigan leaders I describe may support some colorblind practices and beliefs, but they were not altogether avoiding or denying racial issues or even racial inequalities. Many of them valorized racial difference. We also misrepresent institutional changes such as those at Michigan if we assume that organizational elites mimic diversity talk out of social decorum but truly subscribe to a colorblind racism or, as conservative critics have charged (Wood, 2003), a covert politics of radical racial justice.

The diversity orthodoxy is the primary race-conscious alternative to colorblindness in law and in affirmative action politics, as this article shows, but their relationship is far more complex than this. Diversity and colorblindness, as racial orthodoxies, are distinct from each other and sometimes oppositional, yet they also share important similarities and can be complimentary.

The movements for diversity and colorblindness have some common historical roots, both emerging within in the post-civil rights, racial reconstructionist project of cultural pluralism (Marx, 1998). While their supporters’ objectives differ in many respects, both diversity and colorblindness herald a move away from an explicit ideological focus on race and racial inequality. Diversity orthodoxy, like colorblindness, can trivialize the significance of race, and diversity programs certainly can reinforce the dominant status of white people. Both emphasize cultural expressions of race, and both often rely on cultural explanations of how people of color behave. The diversity orthodoxy, however, glorifies these cultural differences. Moreover, unlike colorblindness, it insists that important social differences exist between racial groups, that these differences shape people’s social experiences in meaningful ways, and that institutions should recognize and even take action to support such differences.

We still need more in-depth analyses of the relationship between diversity and colorblindness. How do ideas about diversity and colorblindness co-exist in individuals’ perceptions or in organizational activity? Through what mechanisms does one trump the other? We also could improve racial formation theory by analyzing how each operates. For example, the push for diversity is most clearly expressed through elaborate discursive rationales without a clear vision of how, exactly, inclusion should happen. Colorblindness, in contrast, often provides a rigid ideological prescription based on liberal democratic principles. Although colorblindness has not been a central topic or point of comparison of this article, further research is needed into such questions.

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Notes

- 1 By “affirmative admissions,” I mean university admissions policies that give some preference to African American, Latino, and Native American students based on their racial status (see Skrentny, 2002). See Stulberg et al. (2008) for an analysis of the early adoption of affirmative admissions at Michigan. As Katznelson (2005) observes, affirmative action for white people has been practiced since long before the 1960s—only not in that name—through policies and practices that systematically favor white people in higher education and other institutions such as citizenship and housing.
- 2 See, e.g., Thomas (1972 [1914]) and Steinberg (2001) for academic applications of the concept of racial orthodoxy.

- 3 For a discussion of institutional logics, see e.g., Thornton (2002).
- 4 Powell and four justices found the UC-Davis admission plan to be an unconstitutional quota. Powell also joined the other four justices—the “Brennan Four”—to concur that universities could account for race in admissions decisions. The Brennan Four cited a rationale similar to what UC-Davis had argued: the state had an interest in compensating for racial discrimination and inequality. Justice Powell disagreed with this compensatory rationale and wrote a separate opinion.
- 5 In the early 1990s, the Law School revised its admissions policy to comply with Powell’s opinion.
- 6 The LSA grid directed admissions clerks to reject majority students with a grade point average of 3.0 or lower and SAT scores below 1000 but to accept minority students with those same scores. Admissions criteria openly predicated on an applicant’s race, such as these, are subject to strict legal scrutiny. Although Michigan’s admissions policy favored predominantly white students by, for example, rewarding students whose parents had attended the university, such indirect racial preferences are not subject to a stringent legal standard.
- 7 For an archive of the university’s website on the admissions lawsuits, see URL (consulted 20 March 2011): www.vpcomm.umich.edu/admissions/.
- 8 Quantitative measurements of such efforts are difficult to obtain. According to Fredrick Lynch (1997), almost half of the university’s financial aid gifts, 80 percent of merit scholarship dollars, and 90 percent of nonresident merit scholarship went to underrepresented racial minorities in 1994, although Lynch does not cite an original source for these figures. In 1995, a university spokesperson claimed that the university had race-specific scholarships and fellowships, but these constituted only a small percentage of the university’s financial aid awards (Associated Press, 1995).
- 9 For data on the university’s financial aid, see University of Michigan Common Data Sets for 1998-99 and 2005-06 URL (consulted 17 Jan 2007): http://sitemaker.umich.edu/obpinfo/common_data_set
- 10 Some, but not all, of the income rise is due to inflation.
- 11 Mitchell Stevens (2007:177) found that admissions officers at a private elite Northeast college also sought to enroll minority students without radically changing the college’s enrollment or its campus environment in order to appeal to the “typical student”—namely, a white female who was “financially comfortable, athletically capable, academically respectable, and physically attractive.”
- 12 URL (consulted 20 March 2011): http://www.igr.umich.edu/marketing_your_experience.html

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